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ABSTRACT

Leading scholars in the fields of neurology and psychology recently have published persuasive arguments linking cognition and the emotions as well as proclaiming the significance of emotional intelligence. This paper documents some of those assertions and connects them to the importance of formal education in the skills of critical feeling through the fine arts. (Author)

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To Feel Rightly: Relating the Fine Arts to the Formal Development of the Feeling Function

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You are reading this article because you made a decision. In a decision I would find most personally gratifying, you may have read the title of this article, possess a passion for the topic, and have decided to continue reading to be enriched. However, you may not possess any strong interest in the subject, but continue reading because you have time to kill, are bored, or for any one of a number of personal reasons.

Whatever your motivation, as a consequence of a decision, you have engaged in an action. Life, and the learning we do in life, is full of decisions, and those decisions have consequences. The more serious the decisions and consequences, the more serious the process by which we make decisions becomes.

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The assertions of this paper are that the decision-making process is important to the quality of learning and life; that this process can and should be enhanced through formal education; and that the Fine Arts can contribute significantly and uniquely to this education.

But, wait a second. If the Fine Arts are essential to learning, why do they keep getting cut from our school curriculums? Why do we have to fight so hard just to keep the Fine Arts on the periphery of the school day?

I would argue that this is so because for approximately the last century (or more) rational thought, the discovery of immutable facts through deductive reasoning, has been considered the way of knowing and making decisions by our school systems, by the scientific community and by our society at large.

Rational thought permeates math and science, so those are the emphasized disciplines. The Fine Arts seem to be valued primarily for the emotions and feelings they generate, and emotions and feelings are considered messy, unmeasurable powers of the heart that just get in the way of objective reasoning. For example, in Plato's *Republic* his tri-partite division is Head and Gold; Heart and Silver; Liver and Bronze. Erasmus would have us do away with emotion and put reason in its place. Descarte argued for a dualistic concept of mind and body. The common thread in these beliefs is that the powers of the mind are diminished by physical and emotional influences, so it's best to keep the functions separate and promote the one while suppressing the other two.

Significantly, two recent scientific books by highly regarded experts in their respective fields bring this whole philosophy into serious question. These two authors argue that emotions and feelings play an essential and inseparable roll in all decision-making, and that failing to consider feelings in the decision-making process makes no neurological or psychological sense.

Before continuing with their findings, I need to pause briefly to clarify terminology. I have thus far used the words "emotions" and "feelings" interchangeably, but to continue to indiscriminately use these terms will only cloud the issue.

For our purposes emotions arise from neural and chemical signals organized in the part of the brain called the amygdala, which then sends out signals to act. (The root of the word "emotion" is *motere*, the Latin verb "to move.") Feelings, or the feeling function, occur in the neocortex, which is neurally connected to the amygdala. The feeling function is a process that assigns value to our emotions, that renders judgment on the action our emotions are promoting, and well may modify the emotional suggestion to allow a more fitting, corrective response. The amygdala proposes and the neocortex disposes. Feelings are what we think about our emotions before acting on them. The root of the word "feeling" is the Anglo-Saxon term for "palm of the hand." As our hands feel by touching, so the neocortex feels our emotions by "touching" them. Now let's return to the two authors under consideration.

Antonio Damasio is the M.W. Van Allen Professor of Neurology and head of the department of neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, Iowa City. In his 1994 book *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* he obviously finds fault with Descartes' dualism concept and presents a number of exciting findings and ideas. These include:

Emotions and feeling provide the bridge between rational and nonrational processes. It does not seem sensible to leave emotions and feelings out of any overall concept of mind, though respectable scientific accounts of cognition do precisely that. Feelings are just as cognitive as any other perceptual image.

Feelings are about the the body; they let us mind the body. They interpret the messages of the body that come as emotions, giving these body images a quality of goodness or badness, of pleasure or pain. Because of their inextricable ties to the body, feelings come first in development and retain a primacy that subtly pervades our mental life. Because the brain is the body's captive audience, feelings are winners among equals. They have a say on how the rest of the brain and cognition go about their business.

Most significantly for this presentation, Damasio offers in his book his somatic marker hypothesis, "somatic marker" meaning "gut feelings." Damasio contends that there are decisions that cannot be made well through sheer rationality; they require gut feeling, and the emotional wisdom garnered through past experiences. The somatic marker is a kind of automatic alarm, typically calling attention to a potential danger from a given course of action, or at

times alerting to a golden opportunity. It is a biasing or valuing device that helps eliminate bad options from the decision-making process.

In summary, Damasio believes that the processes of reason and feelings occur in the same neural systems. He believes that emotions and feelings are inherently rational, and that they help manage actions and the decisions required for those actions in a rational way.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman has taught at Harvard, where he received his Ph.D, and currently covers the behavioral and brain sciences for *The New York Times*. In his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*, he asserts that when it comes to predicting peoples' success, IQ may matter less than EQ (Emotional Quotient).

For Goleman, emotional intelligence connotes an understanding of one's own feelings, empathy for the feelings of others and an ability to regulate emotion in a way that enhances living. While he makes no distinction between emotions and feelings, emotional intelligence is basically synonymous with the feeling function, though perhaps a bit broader in scope.

What we've previously described as emotions emanate from the amygdala, which matures much more quickly in the infant brain than the neocortex, the source of the feeling function. The significance here is that the emotional lessons learned in infancy through the amygdala come before we have a way to assign value to them through the neocortex. The result is that the emotional messages sent by the amygdala may be flawed, and the problem is that in an emergency the amygdala can act faster than the neocortex

and override the feeling function with irrational, inappropriate emotions.

Significantly, Goleman presents study after study that conclude that the feeling function can be educated, enhancing emotional intelligence. The more the powers of the feeling function are cultivated through formal training, the less likely the amygdala can enact an emotional hijacking when a true emergency does not exist. The neocortex does not fully develop until between the ages of 16 and 18, meaning that the lessons of emotional management taught to children can shape and enhance the developing neural circuitry. Though it is more difficult, evidence suggests that emotional intelligence can be taught beyond the teenage years, throughout life. Goleman also reports that even the scars of emotional trauma left on the amygdala in early childhood can be treated through the fine arts. To summarize, Goleman believes that emotional intelligence can facilitate abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one's mood's and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to empathize and to hope. He believes that these crucial emotional competencies can indeed be learned and improved upon by children--if we bother to teach them. Goleman reports with regret that even though a high IQ is no guarantee of prosperity, prestige, or happiness in life, our schools and our culture fixate on academic abilities, ignoring emotional intelligence, a set of traits--some might call it character--that also matters immensely for our personal destiny.

Damasio and Goleman present persuasive arguments for the formal cultivation of the feeling function. But, how do the fine arts impact this education? Unless the fine arts uniquely and substantially contribute to the education of the feeling function, their inclusion in this process is at best optional. On the other hand, if they do uniquely and substantially contribute to the education of the feeling function, they must be included in any quality program with that objective.

Bennett Reimer, a member of the Music Education Department at Northwestern University and director of the Center for the Study of Education and the Musical Experience, has long been a proponent of the ability of the fine arts to fill the requirements necessary to be a key component in the education of emotional intelligence.

Reimer would argue that the key criterion for this art is that it convey an aesthetic worth. He defines aesthetics as "the branch of philosophy concerned with the questions of the nature and value of the arts." Any art work that may be sensed to reflect a concern for its nature and value may be defined as aesthetic art. While time does not permit an extensive consideration of the characteristics implied by this definition, I would argue that such an art work would reflect such qualities as subtlety, longevity, unity, complexity and intensity. There is a subjective factor to a final determination of what art conveys at least some of these qualities, but I would say that Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* has it, while "Achy Breaky Heart" by Billy Ray Cyrus probably doesn't; that da Vinci's "Mona Lisa's" "got it," but "Four Dogs Playing Poker"? Probably not.

If the work of art is intrinsically aesthetic, Reimer would argue that it possesses what is of ultimate value about art and the teaching of it. And how does he describe this value in his book *A Philosophy of Music Education* from 1989? To quote him: "Put simply, it is that music and the other arts are a basic way that humans know themselves and their world; they are a basic mode of cognition. The older idea, prevalent since the Renaissance, that knowing consists only of conceptual reasoning, is giving way to the conviction that there are many ways humans conceive reality, each of them a genuine realm of cognition with its own validity and its unique characteristics."

Reimer argues that the basic subjects of reading and writing are fundamental activities for improving the ability to reason and be objective. But he argues that we also learn by feeling, which he defines similarly to our working definition of the feeling function. Reimer concludes, and I quote, "Creating art, and experiencing art, do precisely and exactly for feeling, what writing and reading do for reasoning Creating art and experiencing art educate feeling."

Furthermore, the way the arts educate regarding the feeling function is unique because, to again quote Reimer, "Art works do not tell us about feeling the way psychology does. That is, art works do not conceptualize about 'feeling. Instead, their intrinsic qualities present conditions which can arouse feeling. In the direct apprehension of these qualities we receive an 'experience of feeling rather than 'information about 'feeling."

The value of the fine arts and their inclusion in formal education is certainly not limited to their key role in the

enhancement of the feeling function. Like love, the arts are a many-splendored thing. As we promote the importance of the teaching of the arts to our students, though, I would assert that the argument for the arts primary role in the essential training of the feeling function is a powerful one.

In 1840 the city of Boston introduced music into an American public school curriculum for the first time. I'd like to close with a quote from the Boston School Committee supporting that action: "Now the defect of our present system, admirable as that system is, is this, that it aims to develop the intellectual part of man's nature solely, when for all the true purposes of life, it is of more importance, a hundred fold, to feel rightly, than to think profoundly."

May we always celebrate all the ways the Fine Arts enrich our lives, including how they help us to "feel rightly," and may we always champion their inclusion as an essential part of education.

**Proposal and Abstract for
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Visual Arts Tenth Annual
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and the Education of Artists**

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**Paper Title: "To Feel Rightly: Relating the Fine Arts to the
Formal Development of the Feeling Function"**

Abstract

Leading scholars in the fields of neurology and psychology have recently published persuasive arguments linking cognition and the emotions as well as proclaiming the significance of emotional intelligence. This paper will document some of those assertions and connect them to the importance of formal education in the skills of critical feeling through the fine arts.

Proposal

In his 1994 book *Descartes' Error*, neurologist Antonio Damasio presents the hypothesis that emotions play a fundamental role in rational human behavior. He argues that the processes of reason and feelings occur in the same neural systems, that feelings are just as cognitive as any other perceptual image and that the absence of emotions and feelings can break down rationality.

Harvard psychologist Daniel Goleman further thrusts this relatively new field into the national spotlight with his 1995 book, *Emotional Intelligence*. The term "emotional intelligence" connotes an understanding of one's own feelings, empathy for the feelings of others and the regulation of emotion in a way that enhances living. Goleman's thesis asserts that, when it comes to predicting people's success, IQ may matter less than EQ (Emotional Quotient). While emotions are often perceived as irrational and uncontrollable, Goleman believes that emotional skills can be formally taught, and should not be allowed to develop haphazardly.

The fine arts can play a unique and central role in this educational process. In *A Philosophy of Music Education* (second edition, 1989) Northwestern University's Bennett Reimer argues that "creating art, and experiencing art, do precisely and exactly for feeling what writing and reading do for reasoning . . . Creating art and experiencing art educate feeling." The way the arts educate feeling is unique because, while psychology may conceptualize about feeling, the intrinsic qualities of art works present conditions which can arouse actual feeling, providing an experience of feeling rather than information about feeling.